

Millennial moms put their unique imprint on parenting

Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY 9:54 a.m. EDT May 13, 2014



(Photo: Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY)

Cali Lillywhite is planning a glow-in-the-dark treasure hunt for her kids and their cousins later this month — the next big thing on a growing list of activities for her sons, ages 3 and 5, that she hopes will ramp up their education and imagination and be just plain fun.

From a variety of science experiments to gardening, sewing and cooking, Lillywhite says Westin and Gavin also assist her in the garden and help sew and cook.

"We do a lot of hands-on activities," she says. "I really want to grow and develop their imagination and I definitely encourage it. I'm on my hands and knees with them all the time."

Lillywhite, 27, of Orange, Calif., a married, stay-at-home mom by day and full-time college student at night studying health information technology, is among the more than 16 million mothers ages 18-34 across the USA of the Millennial generation. Because they're in their prime childbearing years, and with many peers not yet partnered or in the throes of parenthood, marketers and others are eager to learn more about how they think and, in turn, how they will change parenthood.

According to yet unpublished 2012 data from the U.S. Census, 16,223,210 women ages 18-34 have given birth to at least one child, representing about 46% of the total women in that age group. As Mother's Day tends to bring together moms of many generations, Lillywhite and her peers are a clear reminder that these young mothers are worlds apart from those decades ago; yet they're taking a fresh approach to parenting with a nod to the past.

"I don't know how mothers did this without their smartphones," says Jessica Salerno-Woodbury, 34, of Kamuela, Hawaii. "I have an app for everything."

Salerno-Woodbury, a married mom who teaches piano and string lessons, says apps helped her from the newborn stage to now, from breastfeeding to sleep schedules, baby milestones and finding babysitters for her 13-month-old son, Alistair.

She also shares ideas, tips, photos and videos on social media, including with her grandfather in Schenectady, N.Y.

"My baby's great-grandfather is on Facebook," she says. "My grandfather logs on to see pictures of his great-grandson every day."

ENDING THE MOMMY WARS

Because today's young moms have different tools and a different perspective, they've drawn attention from myriad market researchers and others, such as Strotzman International, a consulting firm based in Irvine, Calif., that focuses on kids and families. Along with C+R Research of Chicago, the duo analyzed findings from 2,005 Millennial mothers. What they learned prompted a report that says Millennial moms' "predisposition towards alternative sources of information suggests that this might be the generation that ends the 'mommy wars' — the battle between moms ... to achieve the one 'right' way to mother."

"There's more acceptance of different kinds of motherhood. There is not one way," says Kim Lear, 27, of the generational consulting firm BridgeWorks, and a Millennial herself.

"You had the feminist movement, which made it OK for women to go out of the home and go to work. Now it's coming back to it's OK for us to want to stay at home and raise our children and be with the children," says Lillywhite, who had her children at a younger age than many of her generation. "Women are realizing it's OK for them and acceptable for them to want to work, and it's acceptable for them to want to stay at home. They can choose."

Liz Barea, 31, of Wantagh, N.Y, a married stay-at-home mom to 7-month-old daughter Madeline, says advice she gets from older generations is definitely more rigid.



Liz Barea of Wantagh, N.Y, a married stay-at-home mom to 7-month-old daughter Madeline, says advice she gets from older generations is definitely more rigid.*(Photo: Jennifer Selletti)*

"They think there's only one way to do things, and that's it," she says. "But when I speak to people my age, it's 'Whatever works for you.' "

Lear, of Minneapolis, says Millennials may well mark the "end of the experts."

"Boomers had Dr. Spock. Millennials have each other," she says. "They're really relying on each other for information."

Millennials (the oldest born in the late 1970s to early 1980s) have been shaped by a variety of influences, including the fact that they grew up with technology. An ethnically and racially diverse group and one that is highly educated but also under-employed, Millennials are generally optimistic and resilient but also stressed, studies show.

They also grew up in an unsettled time that included 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic collapse and lingering fallout from the recession.

"All this uncertainty made these Millennial parents realize the thing they can control is making their kids' childhoods the best they can be," says Ron Coughlin, Strottman president.

The Strottman/C+R report portrays Millennial mothers as having a strong "mom" identity; a playful, hands-on approach to parenting; nostalgia for a simpler life, from toys to food to the do-it-yourself movement; and a "team family" approach that encourages everyone to pitch in rather than have Mom in the director's seat at home.

Jennifer Handsel, of Tulsa, who turns 29 on Sunday, tutors college students part-time. She says she and her husband, Chris, 30, a mechanical engineer, discussed their division of labor well before their son, Noah, was born seven months ago.

"We kind of joke we're Team Handsel," she says. "I think it's fair, and it keeps us from getting overwhelmed. If there's something that needs to be done, whoever gets to it gets it done."

Historian Neil Howe, a demographer in Great Falls, Va., who along with his late co-author, William Strauss, is credited with coining the term Millennial, says Millennial mothers definitely see the value in sharing tips and responsibilities — with partners, peers and parents.

"Millennials are far more likely than moms of any other generation to be raising their kids near or even in the same house as their extended family. Many of them have their Boomer moms — the grandparents of their kids — living in the same home or living next door," Howe says.

Salerno-Woodbury says her husband's parents live about an hour away, but they bought a "tiny house down the street, so they're up here every weekend."

Lillywhite's mother lives down the street from her young family. Barea, her husband Julio, 29, and daughter just bought the house in which she grew up.

"It was time for us to get a bigger place, and it was time for my parents to move on. Our in-laws and my parents are all five minutes away," she says. "We were like a good 15 to 20 minutes away and then when we had the baby, instead of looking for houses further out, we decided we wanted to be even closer to family. We visit my parents and in-laws at least two to three times a week."

EMBRACING THEIR 'MOMNESS'

Distinctively Millennial characteristics that have surfaced in other surveys include:

A report on Millennial moms from the [Meredith Parents Network](#) (includes *Parents*, *American Baby* and other parenting media) released in November, based on responses from 1,103 Millennial mothers, 83% use video-sharing sites; 78% use mobile apps and image-sharing sites; 38% use Pinterest; and 33% use Instagram.

A new survey by [BabyCenter.com](#), a pregnancy and parenting website, finds that of 1,061 mothers 18 and older, there's an almost even split between working moms and stay-at-home moms, reflecting the large numbers in each camp. The survey finds 45% are stay-at-home; 1% unemployed; 3% on maternity leave vs. 39% employed full-time and 12% employed half-time. Of all surveyed, more than 90% turn to parenting advice and support from family and friends; about two-thirds tap into online parenting communities; more than one-third cite social media. Millennials comprise 69% of the survey group. Of the working Millennial moms, 64% say they wish they could quit and stay at home.



Cali Lillywhite conducts a science project with her sons, Westin, 3, and Gavin, 5. The experiments showed the chemical reaction of combining baking soda and vinegar to generate carbon dioxide. (Photo: Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY)

"Millennial moms are very much into the role of being a mom," Howe says, based upon research he's done. "It's very striking how much they really identified with their 'momness' and boasted about being a mom."

Such sentiments are reflected in a Millennial mom report from BabyCenter released in January, showing that of 1,353 Millennial mothers surveyed, 88% term their parenting style as "fun."

Barea says what surprised her is the change that's taken place since their daughter's birth. She says she and Julio "always wanted to go out and be with our friends all the time."

"Now we want to be with her all the time," she says. "I kind of feel like this is what I was meant to do my whole life."